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**Working in Harmony:
The Process of Writing Music and Lyrics for a Musical**

By

Crystal Hanson

An Honors Thesis Presented to the Honors Committee
Of Western Oregon University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
Graduation from the Honors Program

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Western Oregon University
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Working in Harmony:

The Process of Writing Music and Lyrics for a Musical

Introduction

Writing the music and lyrics for a musical is like riding a camel—there’s so much that could go wrong. This is particularly true if one has never written music or lyrics before. Yet, in spite of the many things that did go wrong during this process, I emerged with a very clear understanding of the composition process and the skills composition requires, as well as a clearer understanding of the text I composed the music for. The *why* of this project is a bit harder to understand.

The truth is, I couldn’t explain to you my motivations behind the whole project if I tried. Shoot, I couldn’t explain every melodic or rhythmic difference away—some things just crept in. But this thesis will do its absolute best to explain my composition process—even if, at the time, it seemed like stuff was just coming out of my fingers and I didn’t dare stop it, good, bad, or predictable.

So What? (or, how does this fit into the larger picture?)

I want to teach literature, preferably at a high school. I anticipate many students detesting the subject matter, or simply not being open to reading. One of the main goals for me at the outset of this thesis was to find a way to explain *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in a more interactive way, as an alternative or supplement to lecturing. I think this thesis was very helpful for exploring different ways to teach. I was able, through music, to make the metaphor of Bertilak hunting animals clearer, and thus explore different ways to expose metaphor. I also think

this project helped me see literature itself as more interactive, simply by bringing it to life.

This project was also enlightening in that it taught me how to collaborate with fellow students and the compromises needed in order for a project like this to work. Essentially, working with students in groups for classes is bad enough. This was a collaboration of artists, each one a specialist in a different field and thus with a limited understanding of the other fields and a high expectation of the student connected to that field. Overcoming these obstacles was the main difficulty of our collaboration, but without this collaboration we surely would not have had such an awesome product: our production.

Before the Musical: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

The idea of the musical came from the tenth-century text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written by someone whose name is lost to antiquity(although many believe it was written by the “Pearl Poet”) and translated by Jessie L. Weston. The summary runs thus: a large green knight shows up at King Arthur’s court and challenges anyone to strike him. Sir Gawain accepts, and chops off his head. The Green Knight then picks up his head, says that he will return the blow in a year, and leaves. A year from then, Gawain goes out in search of the Green Knight. Upon finding a castle, he stops there to rest, and the lord of the castle declares the Green Knight lives close by. The lord of the castle then makes a deal with Sir Gawain: whatever he catches hunting will be exchanged with what Sir Gawain receives while staying in the castle. Gawain receives, for three days, a kiss from the lord’s

wife, while the lord catches various symbolically significant animals. On the final day, Gawain accepts a scarf that will supposedly save his life from the wife and neglects to give it to the lord of the castle. Then he sets out in search for the Green Knight. The Green Knight, once found, swings his axe three times and nicks him on the third swing. Gawain leaps up in terror, claiming his debt fulfilled, to discover that the lord of the castle and the Green Knight were the same person. The Green Knight then announces that the whole situation was a plan by Morgan le Fay to test Sir Gawain's morals. Gawain valued his life more than his honor; thus, he vows to wear the scarf as a symbol of his shame forever. The knights at Camelot think this is a wonderful idea, and the green scarf becomes popular attire for everyone at Camelot.

The only part of the text we altered was the addition of Sam, a person from current time who we included in the story to lend a modern opinion and viewpoint to the story. He also gave us an excuse to ridicule ourselves and provide explanations to the audience under the guise of providing explanations to Sam. Sam did not sing because he was not from the magical, musical time of Sir Gawain.

In the original novel, Morgan le Fay is not mentioned until the very end, when the Green Knight announces that she was behind the whole idea. To that end, we did not have Gawain see Morgan until the very last moment. However, the audience and Sam know she is behind everything. We probably gave the text a much more feminist slant, but that is not surprising considering Maria, Alysse, and I are all women. Since Morgan was in charge the whole time, she sang the first and last song.

The one part of the text I made sure to clarify was the extended metaphor in the center of the story, during which time Bertilak (our name for the Green Knight; he is not named in Weston's translation) hunts animals that are metaphors for Gawain's actions in the bedchamber with Bertilak's wife, Lilith (also not named in Weston's translation). To make this metaphor as clear as possible, I explicitly described the metaphor in the lyrics of the song while the music emphasized the metaphor in several ways (see "The Knight's Wife's Dance").

In the text, although Gawain and Lilith do kiss, it is a much more chaste kiss than it seems in our musical. We altered this because it adds more drama and it is more fun. Plus, I really wanted to add a tango. We were not sure how well the subtlety would translate, and a handshake really does not convey that Gawain struggled to not give in to Lilith.

Research

My primary concerns were learning how to write music for strings and learning what is expected of a musical. In order to observe this, I did three things: took Dr. Harchanko's Orchestration II class (focused on strings for the first half of the term), enrolled in composition lessons for a year with Dr. Whitley, my advisor, and attended, listened to, and watched as many musicals as possible. Since my composition lessons focused on the music for the musical, Dr. Whitley's help is described throughout. However, I will enumerate other things here.

The greatest skills I carried away from Dr. Harchanko's Orchestration II were those of proper voicing for strings. Among other things, he taught me how to

write double stops for strings so that they laid properly on the strings and were easy to play (simplicity being, as always, a main concern). The trick is to always orchestrate double stops in intervals of 5-5-6 or 6-5-5. Of course, many string players here just choose one note and play that one, but in the rare instance they should choose to play both, my writing was ready to facilitate that.

As for watching musicals in person and on video, this influenced my writing more than I could describe adequately. While I orchestrated the music—even while I wrote the music—I listened to other musicals on Youtube, such as *A Very Potter Musical*, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, *Chicago*, *Company*, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Rent*, *West Side Story*, *The Producers*, *Spamalot*, *Carousel*, *A Little Night Music*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods*, *Cinderella*, and many others. The influence of these musicals on my writing is huge, and yet I cannot enumerate the moments of inspiration.

I have personally played in 3 pit orchestras: *Beauty and the Beast* and *HMS Pinafore* in high school, and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* my freshman year of college. These experiences taught me about musical cues, the way conductors should conduct musicals, and how much musicians practice. Because of these experiences, my music was quite different. In fact, because I play the violin, I only wrote music for stringed instruments. This began because I am not entirely sure how to orchestrate things for brass, woodwinds and percussion, but it was useful because strings are easier to direct as concerns dynamics and we did not have mikes for the vocalists. Furthermore, strings sound more like voices and I am quite familiar with the many different techniques of getting sound out of them.

Writing Text and Music Simultaneously

It would be wonderful if I could actually write text and music simultaneously. Generally, I prefer starting out with text, since lyrics give the composer a rhythm to base the structure of the song around. That is definitely what happened with “Great Aunt;” I just constructed a melody around my poem. The way I wrote lyrics was the basic structure of very simple poetry: rhyming lines and strict meter (meaning the same number of beats in each line). Having the same number of beats in each line makes the time signature of the song easier to figure out because there are only a certain number of beats to work with and they are already divided.

Writing the music first means, for me, that the melody is tighter and simpler. This is because there are no pesky syllables requiring extra emphasis for which new notes must be added. One also doesn’t have to worry about articles like “the” requiring an extra preparatory note before the downbeat. However, it also means the lyricist has to write much more concisely—a difficult task when plot development has to happen throughout the song. Furthermore, the melody should be fairly repetitive, with short phrases, in order to lend itself to repeated stanzas in the lyrics. An example would be “The Green Knight’s Challenge,” in which there are 3 different phrases, used and re-used. A melody which does not repeat, but which changes, requires a very different style of writing for the lyrics (and is often less catchy). Thus, when I wrote the melody first, I made sure to only write a small, spare melody, and then nail it down with a word format before going any farther with the music.

There is a tangible difference between the songs I wrote the lyrics for first, and the songs I wrote the melody for first. In “Great Aunt,” “Gawain’s Response,” “The Hunt” 1, 2, & 3, and all the verses to “The Knight’s Wife’s Dance,” every syllable has a note to it. This is called *syllabic* composition. There are no notes in which there is no new syllable, or the syllable is held longer than another one. They are evenly spaced and measured; emphasis for the musical phrase depends on the text and emotion of the musicians.

However, I wrote the melody of the chorus to “The Knight’s Wife’s Dance” before I wrote the lyrics; hence the different lengths of notes. I was trying to capture a feeling with the music and fill it with words instead of capturing a feeling with words and backing it up with music. Something similar happened with “Symbol of Shame;” that song came about because I wanted a cheesy repentance song and came up with a cheesy melodic idea that I filled out with words. I think that was the only song for which the melody and lyrics pretty much came simultaneously; it was the most “organic” song of the bunch.

“Symbol of Shame” was written melody first and filled out with words; this is evident in the fact that there are often many notes to just one syllable; for example, the second syllable of the verse always has three notes to itself (I fe-e-el ashamed). In the score, the lyrics are stretched out to accommodate the melody. Stretching syllables in this way is referred to as *melismatic*.

Text-Setting: The Secret to Writing All Vocal Music

People who understand iambic pentameter know how to write music. The most important thing I learned about writing vocal songs is that the strong beats (1 and 3, in common time) absolutely must, must, must go on the strong words. One cannot write a song, the first verse of which begins with “the”, and have “the” occur on the downbeat of one. It has to be a pick-up note or the emphasis will be on the wrong syllable. When hearing the music mentally, it will sound normal. Only when someone else sings it will people get the feeling that the floor is shifting under their feet. It’s like problems with intonation—they are only a tiny bit off, but they sound like the world is crumbling.

The first thing to learn is that articles and conjunctions must never be emphasized. A good example sentence is “the birds and the bees.” The important words there are “birds” and “bees.” The two “the”s should not be emphasized; speaking the sentence like that would make no sense. “And” is also an unimportant word. Thus, the important words should land on the strong beats of the music and the articles should land on weak beats.

However, music has a regular pattern of strong and weak beats which spoken words sometimes—but not always—follow. For example, in 3/4 time, beat one is strong; beats two and three are weak. In 4/4 time, beats one and three are strong; beats two and four are weak. And so forth. Changing the time signature merely to accommodate the rhythm of speech is horrible for the musicians, and the audience will hear that the music is slightly off-beat; it will make everyone vaguely uncomfortable. Thus, the lyrics must fit the music. This is why heavily rhythmic

poetry (generally iambic pentameter) fits best with music. This is also why lyrics sound so cheesy and contrived without music behind them.

Here is a decent example of syllabic writing from “Great Aunt.” Notice how, for the most part, the syllables that would be emphasized in normal speech have been placed on downbeats. The first word(s) are pickup notes; the only real problem is “Mozart,” since the emphasis is placed on the wrong part of his name.

I spelled the spears and swords of Knights in fights of Arthur's time.

I'll spawn the son who has begun a great patricial crime.

My children rise beneath my eyes, their greatness sets them apart.

But for Newton's fame and Berkeley's claims, my favorite is Mozart.

An example of bad text-setting occurred in “Great Aunt” for me. Morgan le Fay's third verse in “Great Aunt” begins, “You'll learn the laws and lives of men depending on virtue.” “You'll” is of course the pickup beat. But, since music, like our way of speaking, alternates strong and weak beats, following this line to the conclusion reveals a problem with the word “virtue.” Namely, the emphasis is normally on “Vir” and not “tue.” Unfortunately, the way the text laid on the page meant that emphasis was placed on “tue.” That verse will plague me for the rest of my life.

Lessons in Finale (or, the horror!)

Using the computer program Finale was one of the largest challenges of writing this music. Unfortunately, my handwriting is atrocious and I have no other music writing program on my own computer. Most of the writing occurred in

Smith Hall's Midi Lab. Dr. Whitley was very helpful in teaching me how to use Finale.

Finale, like most necessary things, is a huge pain in the butt. Finale is necessary, in the first place, because it is necessary that everyone will be able to read the music on the page. When I was in high school, we often played music arranged by our conductor, and it was handwritten—and practically illegible. Thus, Finale is the perfect solution. Finale is to handwritten music what Microsoft Word is to handwritten essays. Quite frankly, once one has the hang of inputting music into Finale, it is much faster than handwritten music. It has all sorts of handy tools, like Transpose, which allows one to change the notes into a different range, letting me copy and paste the melody from one instrument to another instead of having to rewrite the whole thing. Considering how many reprises I wrote, I should probably send Finale my first-born child—that's how much time I saved.

Finale's tools are quite useful. For example, one of the things I learned how to do after most of the music was written were pickup notes; song 8a has a pickup measure unlike any other song in the show. Textual cues (the lines prompting the music) are also possible to insert in Finale and were probably the most helpful Finale detail for musicians.

One difficulty was how to not use whole sheets of paper for just 8 bars of scene change music or a few musical cues. The original solution which Dr. Whitley and I discussed was hiding the measures surrounding the music in order to give the music the appearance of several different songs on one page. As it turned out, this messed with my musicians' minds; they preferred a fermata over a rest and

would simply write HAF (Huge-Ass Fermata) over the fermata to remind themselves of the length.

Using articulations such as slurs was difficult because the computers would not let me put slurs on things. A lot of the slurs, therefore, are a little off-center. I did not want to put in too many bowings, either, but I made sure to use them where the bowing would create the correct emphasis all on its own.

Finally, Finale often freezes and deletes whatever it is that you have been writing, something handwritten music never does. It is also unbelievably difficult to find some symbols required by the music—symbols which I could have written out very easily, but which Finale required me to do hours of searching and questing after. Maybe I won't send Finale my first-born child, after all.

Final verdict? Yes, Finale is incredibly useful, especially for someone who has handwriting as crappy as mine. I couldn't vouch for whether or not it takes less time—I don't play the piano particularly well, and thus was unable to use the keyboard method of inputting notes, instead having to click each individual note—but when all is said and done, I'd rather my time added up to something instantly legible. Plus, Finale lets me email my music to others, and make (incredibly crappy-sounding) soundtracks of my pieces! Hard copies don't start playing my music out loud, no matter how much I beg.

Ch-ch-ch-changes

The song "Spiraling Madness" was originally a song wherein Morgan le Fay magically altered Lilith's memory so that she hated Sir Gawain, enough to help her

husband orchestrate Morgan's revenge. In the beginning, we thought Lilith just didn't have enough motivation to be messing with Gawain's mind. Of course, after I had the lyrics written, the music written and fully orchestrated for piano, I found out that Alysse and Maria wanted that scene cut from the script; Lilith had enough motivation after all. What had been my favorite song was scrapped (except for 8 bars or so, which became scene change music).

Speaking of changes, our original plot interpretation was that Sir Gawain actually fell for Lilith, which is why Gawain's lyrics for "The Knight's Wife's Dance: Day 2" say, "I want you, I need you/I long to steal you/ Give you a new chance/ To dance a Knight's Wife's Dance." Five weeks before performance time, Alysse informed me that the motivation had changed and asked whether I would change the lyrics or whether I would prefer her changing the script. Thank heaven, she changed the script; I do not know how the rhymes and rhythms would have happened otherwise (Plus, it would have completely destroyed the tango itself).

Ah, the last-minute changes were above and beyond the most stressful. There is nothing like casting your musical for acting ability and finding out some of them can't carry a tune in a bucket the size of Wisconsin. One of them was Sir Gawain, the title character. Now, our Sir Gawain worked very hard to nail his melodies, of which he had three, and he did a fine job with "Gawain's Response" and "The Knight's Wife's Dance." However, "Symbol of Shame" was still shaky a week until performance time. I told him to overact like anything and speak-sing the first verse; 15 Miles West would sing the rest. Richy did a fine job of the first verse; unfortunately the meaning of the words for the last two verses was a bit

lost, as I just replaced all of the 'I's in the song with 'He' or variations thereon. I highly doubt anyone else noticed, but... oh well.

Instrumental Music

Instrumental music—the music written without voices—was largely scene-change music or scene setting. I chose themes from surrounding songs (for example, “16a,” which came after “Symbol of Shame,” was essentially a short reprise of the song). This music had to be two things: unobtrusive and defining. It needed to be almost unconscious, not something that intruded onto the scene. However, it also had to foreshadow the mood of the upcoming scene, like “Spiraling Madness” and “The Confrontation,” or echo the mood of the scene just past, like “16a.” This wasn’t too difficult; I just chose the melody of a song that had just happened and re-orchestrated it to be quieter. For “The Confrontation,” I moved some of the voicing so it was higher pitched and more tremulous, to echo Gawain’s timidity in the face of the Green Knight.

For “8a,” I did something different: I used the theme of “The Green Knight’s Challenge.” This was because Gawain was staying at Bertilak’s castle and I wanted to foreshadow that Bertilak was the Green Knight.

“Overture”

This song only includes themes from Act 1. The first theme, that of “Great Aunt,” features a permutation of the melody of the chorus, because the melody is baroque and a baroque musician would add trills and so forth to such a line. The

second theme, “The Green Knight’s Challenge,” gives the melody wholly to the viola while all the other instruments are pizzicato. I love the sound of the viola, being low and melodic, and wanted to bring it out. Plus, our violist was very confident and was completely capable of playing a solo. After “Gawain’s Response,” the “Overture” ends on “In Love and Hatred True.” The melody is in the first violin, while all the other instruments are supposed to be imitating a pedalled piano, or a harp’s plucked chord. The pizzicato in the bass at the end of the “Overture” is meant to hint at the tango that approaches.

Initially, I wanted to have some sort of scene-setting music, like the beginning of *Carousel*, but the script really didn’t allow for that, since the whole thing began in Morgan le Fay’s living room with her watching TV (which we changed to a magazine for expense reasons). I decided to use only songs from Act 1 since it seemed more appropriate. Plus, I really didn’t want the “Overture” to be too long.

“Great Aunt”

This song was largely inspired by Mozart’s Queen of the Night aria in *The Magic Flute*. I doubt Mozart’s music is recognizable in Morgan le Fay’s “I’m your step-dad’s father’s sister’s grandma’s brother’s mother’s grandpa’s aunt!” lyrical rant, but that is my little Mozart tribute. The reason for the Queen of the Night reference is that Morgan le Fay, in personality, is just as controlling and in charge as the Queen of the Night, and I felt that sort of musical support would reinforce her character. The music was set to fit the lyrics (largely syllabic), and the form is

that of a hymn, since that is the format of song I am most familiar with (verse, chorus, verse, etc.). I did not use a traditional 'let's repeat the last phrase as an introduction to the song' lead-in for Morgan le Fay, instead opting for a more dramatic run of triplets up the scale.

Two features stand out most to me when I consider "Great Aunt": Morgan le Fay's patter chorus and my orchestral markings. I got the idea for Morgan's chorus from patter songs such as Gilbert and Sullivan's "I am the very model of a modern major general" (HMS Pinafore) and "It really doesn't matter" (Ruddigore). A patter song is when the vocalists must enunciate each syllable particularly well since the song is taken at top speed, sometimes accelerating, and the song draws its humor largely from the speed at which the words are sung. When my composition teacher, Dr. Whitley, learned I wanted to write a patter song, he convinced me to change the lyrics from "I'm your great great great great great great (etc) aunt" to "I'm your stepdad's niece's (etc) aunt." This was necessary, as speeding up the word "great" tends to make porridge out of the most controlled voice. In order to allow the vocalist to take this part of the song at whatever speed she deemed appropriate, I put all of the strings on changing chords, had them tremelo in order to maintain energy and tension while stretching tempo, and made sure the conductor simply followed the vocalist.

My orchestration of "Great Aunt" is meant to sound baroque because that particular sound echoes the prerogative of Morgan le Fay: to take Sam back in time. In order to give the song a baroque feeling, I gave downbeats a heavy emphasis, writing in a down-up-up bowing pattern. The second violins in verse 2

and the viola in verse 3 play the same bowing pattern, but are illustrating the full chord, which is a rather over-utilized technique and sounds sufficiently aged. The plucked third verse, with only the viola playing arco, is also baroque.

The scene change music at the end of “Great Aunt” is “Spiraling Madness” in a major key. It was legato in order to lend a regal tone to the following scene, where we met King Arthur.

“The Green Knight’s Challenge”

Since this is the first full song of King Arthur’s court, I wanted it to feel very baroque and dance-like, in order to evoke celebratory feasts and folk-dances. To that end, I wrote it in 6/8, with a heavy emphasis on downbeats to give it the dance-like feel of a gagliarde. I wrote the lyrics with a particular tune in mind. Unfortunately, after they were written, I phoned Maria to see if the tune sounded okay and she said it was the tune to “Bring a Torch, Jeannette Isabella” (No great surprise, considering Christmas had just passed). I posed this problem to my composition teacher, and he recommended I invert the melody (aka, turn it upside down). Inverted, it barely resembled the original tune. In order to perpetuate the Baroque feeling, I gave each instrument a chance at the melody, and often when it was in the violins or cello I would give them a slightly more complicated, uninverted version of “Bring a Torch,” in a nod to the remarkable way baroque viol players embellish and alter melodies.

The key change (from G to G Minor) in this piece is meant to be extremely surprising to King Arthur and his court; they don’t see it coming and neither do we.

Unfortunately, not foreshadowing this key change played havoc with the vocalist. The repeated downbeat chords in this section and the vamp at the end of the song intend to sound like the menacing footsteps of the Green Knight.

“Gawain’s Response”

I wrote the melody of this song before I wrote the lyrics. Even though there are even numbers of syllables, the syllables needing emphasis do not fall on the same beats of the measure and thus required different voicing. For example, in the lyrics, contrast “apology” and “analogy” with “reception” and “rejection”—even though the lines as a whole each had 11 syllables, apology and analogy both have 4, and reception and rejection only have 3, yet each is the final word in the phrase, and the second syllable must be emphasized in both. Thus, to reach the concluding note for reception and rejection, the vocalist had to sing a note that did not get its own syllable (melisma).

The melodic idea of this song was to contrast Sir Gawain’s bravado with his actual feelings, hence the alternating major key and minor key. Lines in major C have wimpy lyrics, and the voice is accompanied by a wavering violin (imitating a wavering, high-pitched whine or cry). Lines in minor C are played punchily, with the melody beefily echoed in the cello. The relevatory section, in which we play up a scale until we reach a conclusive note, is essentially a scale because it is the most logical progression of notes in Western music and Sir Gawain reaches an incredibly obvious logical conclusion in those lyrics (“I only have to/ cut his neck in two/ and then he will never hit me back”). I ended with the boisterous “Green Knight’s

Challenge” melody in order to illustrate Gawain’s sudden confidence and the fact that the court is behind him. It also ironically illustrates, by using the Green Knight’s melody, that Gawain is acting exactly according to the Green Knight’s plan.

“The Green Knight’s Headless Reprise”

This is the song immediately after the Green Knight’s head is chopped off. Even though it would make sense to place it in a minor key, I used a major key in hopes of gruesome comedy. The original idea was that the Green Knight would enter holding his head in his hands and dance about in a parody of the dance performed in the instrumental section of The Green Knight’s Challenge, and the major key and jolly sound would contrast with the threatening lyrics of the Green Knight.

“Spiraling Madness”

This melody was originally intended for a scene in which Lilith descends into lunacy as Morgan le Fay gradually convinces her that Gawain is responsible for all of her life’s miseries and deserves to be taught a moral lesson. That is why it is written in 4/4, with the harmonies emphasizing beats 1, 2.5, and 4. When the viola joins in, it plays the same chords as the violins but hits the notes in opposite order so the feeling of being off-center is maintained. The pizzicato measure, where violin and viola exchange plucks, should contribute even more to the feeling of being off-balance.

I chose this particular section—including the two introductory smooth measures—for transition music for much of the show because for the whole show Sam and Gawain are off-balance and sinister things lurk in the wings. Besides, I loved the song and was excited to get a new chance to use it.

“In Love and Hatred True”

This is the most traditional song in the bunch. Its subtitle, appropriately, is “The Obligatory Love Song.” I knew, when I began, that I wanted to write a love song. They’re part of the stereotypical format of musicals. I decided the only couple deserving of one was the married couple—the antagonists, Sir Gawain and Lady Lilith. The fact that the antagonists get the sweet song, and the lyrics speaking to ruining Sir Gawain’s life, add a little bit of interest and variety into an otherwise typical love song.

And this song certainly sounds very typical. It actually leads the voices in by repeating the final phrase of the song. The voicing of the instruments is as legato and chordal as possible, in order to add to the syrupy sweetness. Finally, I gave the second violins a pizzicato line that imitates the sound of a harp (without a harp at my disposal, I needed to get creative).

The original title of this song was “Intro to Love Montage.” In other words, this is essentially “The Knight’s Wife’s Dance” re-orchestrated in a major key with different lyrics. That accounts for the rhythmic patterns, which are identical. I rewrote some of the notes for the chorus in order to get a sweeter song, but the melodic ideas are almost identical, in order to foreshadow what will come of this

love song: “The Knight’s Wife’s Dance.” The song begins and ends with a chord that gradually sweeps through the strings—the most sickeningly sweet thing I could think of.

“Entr’acte”

This song only includes themes from Act 2 (except for “Spiraling Madness,” my usual transition music, meant to fade away at the end into the conversation). The “Entr’acte” was by far my favorite music. All the music of the “Entr’acte” until it reaches “Symbol of Shame” has the tango bass line somewhere in the music. I began with the bass line to give the impression of a minor tango approaching, and then began with the love song just to shake things up a bit. I gave the violins the melody and counterpoint (gradually) before switching to the tango in C minor. For the tango, I began with the violin plucking the tango bass line and the bass plucking the tango melody. I loved this sound; it was inspired by the bass line of *Peer Gynt*: “In the Hall of the Mountain King.” Gradually, the tango builds, adding melody, counterpoint, and countermelody, until it fades into “Symbol of Shame.” Here I gave the cello the melody to best imitate the range of the voice that would be singing it. I ended with “Spiraling Madness,” my most regularly used transition music, to allow the actors to fade into the scene.

“The Knight’s Wife’s Dance” (1&2)

The same rhythm runs from “In Love and Hatred True” through all of the “Hunt” songs and tangos (“The Knight’s Wife’s Dance” 1 & 2 and “The Hunt of the

Knight's Wife"). This dotted quarter-eighth-quarter-quarter rhythm somehow embodies all of the tangos I listened to while writing this song. The songs I focused on were "El Tango de Roxanne" from *Moulin Rouge*, "Tango: Maureen" from *Rent*, and the "Cell Block Tango" from *Chicago*. I also listened to sultry violin music, such as the *Lalo Symphonie Espanol*.

The idea to have a countermelody in the violin (day 1) and cello (day 2) was inspired by the violin solo in "El Tango de Roxanne." The reason this countermelody was in the background music during the scenes as well as the songs was that I wanted "The Hunt" and "The Knight's Wife's Dance" to be connected musically. "The Hunt" is a metaphor for what happens during "The Knight's Wife's Dance," and in order to emphasize this I gave them the same bass line and did not have a musical break between "The Hunt: Day 1" and "The Knight's Wife's Dance: Day 1," etc. I gave them the tango countermelody for the background because on day 1 of the tango, Lilith was dominant, and therefore the countermelody was in the violin. On day 2, Gawain was dominant, and thus the countermelody was in the cello.

There are 3 independent lines in the chorus of The Knight's Wife's Dance Day 2: Lilith's melody, Gawain's melody, and the countermelody. Due to my experience in the Early Music Consort at Western Oregon University, I often have the chance to hear counterpoint, and I love the effect so much that I decided to do that with my tango. I was also inspired by "My Eyes" and "A Man's Gotta Do" from *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, a short musical written by Joss Whedon and his

family. These songs feature characters singing about opposing views in the same song and I just couldn't resist giving it a shot.

The tremelo note at the end of every "Knight's Wife's Dance" is to add an extra shot of drama to the forbidden kiss Gawain and Lilith share. This show was all about over-the-top cheesiness, and nothing is cheesier than that.

"The Hunt" (1,2&3)

These melodies retained the tango rhythm of "The Knight's Wife's Dance" to illustrate that they were happening at the same time as "The Knight's Wife's Dance" and were part of the same plan. This was also to show that, metaphorically, the animal Sir Bertilak hunted was Sir Gawain. If the audience didn't understand the lyrics, they certainly would understand the musical similarities. The lyrics of all three "Hunt"s are literal analysis of the metaphor within the text; however, I understand how unlikely it is that the audience is paying very close attention to the words while an actor is chasing a cardboard cutout with a spear through the aisles.

The musical interlude in the beginning of "The Hunt"s was put in to allow for this chase scene, since breaking the fourth wall is one of my favorite theatrical devices. The idea to put the sound of a hunting horn in the music, much like the idea to put the sound of a harp in the love song, was snatched from two sources: *The Music Man* and my old high school orchestra. The first song in *The Music Man*, "Rock Island," features a bunch of salesmen speak/singing in a way to imitate the motion and sounds of a train. My old high school orchestra, likewise, recently did a

song that requires a horse's whinny: "Sleigh Ride." Instead of having some sort of electronic device, the conductor simply had their best cellist play a horselike whinny, and it worked fairly well. Thus, I tried different notes until I approximated something like the traditional hunting horn, and incorporated it into the viola and second violin lines.

As each day passes, "The Hunt" gains complexity in rhythm. The different rhythms in the lines are intended to add interest and also drama, as the stakes are getting higher for Gawain and thus should be getting higher in "The Hunt" as well.

"The Hunt of the Knight's Wife"

This song is the culmination of all of "The Hunt"s and "Knight's Wife's Dance"s. It builds the countermelodies, one by one, until the last chorus includes every one and that persistent, unyielding bass line. I gave the melody to Sir Bertilak because it is his plan, after all, that inspired the tangos. Originally, I intended Bertilak and Gawain to tango together for this scene, since that is metaphorically what they are doing. That is why Gawain still sings his line. I gave Lilith "The Hunt" melody and lyrics because she is, after all, a huntress and her husband's weapon of choice against Gawain. This was as obvious as I could make the metaphor. This song also offered me the opportunity to hear all of my melodies alongside each other. I love this song.

“Symbol of Shame”

The melody of this song and its lyrics came to me at almost the same time, after sweating over what style of song to make it for weeks. In the original story, Sir Gawain apologizes profusely for his actions, and returns to Camelot vowing to wear the green scarf until the day he dies as a symbol of shame for his actions. When he arrives at Camelot, all of the knights are so touched by his story that they praise him as a hero and likewise vow to wear green scarves as an indication of how much they respect Gawain. In other words, Gawain’s supposed “symbol of shame” becomes the newest trendy fashion, and instead of shameful it becomes a mark of awesomeness. This clearly called for an awesome song, because something this ridiculous happening in conclusion to a story needs to be commemorated.

I chose a Gospel-style song because I wanted it to be obvious how overly dramatic Gawain was being about the scratch from the axe on his neck and his brief moral lesson. The chorus was supposed to be comprised of the Knights of the round table. The supporting music was simple in order to make the lines of the vocalists simpler, and because too much else going on just ruined the sound of the music. Originally, the chorus’s actual high lyrics (“Symbol of Shame!/Yeah, yeah, yeah!”) were supposed to be three female backup dancers. However, we didn’t have those, and 15 Miles West did a great job as the Theme Song Guys. The middle presto section was to explain the feelings of the knights themselves (Gawain shouldn’t feel ashamed) in more detail while building energy for the song. However, the final few measures were as dramatic as I could get. The style imitated the large choral endings of long hymns (A-Men), and I gave the basses a

nice “dum-dum-dum-dum-dum” down to the final note because I didn’t think the “A-Men” sound was quite cheesy enough on its own.

“Great Aunt Reprise”

This song was added in because a musical should end with music. We needed a high note to end on, so I threw together this reprise. Anyway, although it was the end of Sam and Gawain’s story, Morgan le Fay’s story was continuing and her new beginning was their ending. She had also orchestrated the whole story, and it was quite appropriate, therefore, to have Morgan begin and end the whole show.

“Finale”

This song began with “The Green Knight’s Challenge” for a peppy introduction. We generally tried to rush through this in order to reach “Symbol of Shame” in time for 15 Miles West’s bows. From “Symbol of Shame,” we went into “Spiraling Madness,” and then “The Knight’s Wife’s Dance/Hunt.” The tango had repeat signs in case we needed a longer finale; this was never the case. The show ended with “In Love and Hatred True” because I wanted to end on a happy, sappy note (just like the show!), and this was the best way to accomplish it.

Performance

Performing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: The Musical!* had been my intention since I began writing the music, but that does not make the actual

performances anything other than a miracle. True, for the performance, we had to alter various props, lyrics, and scenes (see Ch-ch-ch-changes). However, that is just the way things are for any performance. The difference with this one was that we could change as much as we wanted.

Of course, for the performance itself, I wrote a good deal of scene change music during the five weeks of rehearsal. This entailed a great deal of finding the appropriate song for what preceded the scene and what would follow, and then taking that melody and reworking it. Often, I would put a melody in a different octave and choose my favorite rhythms from throughout the song, selecting those to repeat. There were quite a few vamps.

I scheduled the space we performed in (for a while there, we thought we would have to perform in Maria's basement, or possibly the ITC building at WOU. I spoke with everyone in Smith Hall and my advisor Gavin Keulks multiple times, and eventually managed to secure late-night practice times and three rehearsal dates. Our rehearsals were originally 8-10; unfortunately, we were bumped to 8:30 in order to accommodate another musical in rehearsal that was going to perform in April.

The musicians rehearsed Mondays and Wednesdays and the actors rehearsed Tuesdays and Thursday. I attended every rehearsal in order to make sure the music was going to translate from the pit to the stage. After extended rehearsals, we added quite a few cues to the piano music, since the pianist was much more accustomed to playing the cues than the pit. In fact, Lauren Potter, our

pianist, printed out her own version of “The First Noel” to play during one transition.

We also wanted storage space in Smith Hall for our costumes, sets and props. Unfortunately, they would allow us to have a box in one room and then the space above the instrument lockers—that was all. We managed to create such lightweight props and sets as would fit entirely in the instrument storage space, but it certainly was a large hurdle to overcome.

Speaking of props, they were done by Maria and myself, with some help from Jamie Bradley, our Green Knight/Sir Bertilak. The cardboard was donated by Kristina Sisto(Morgan le Fay)’s father, and, aside from the tables and chairs, everything was cardboard. We were initially worried about excess cheesiness, until we realized it was the best thing we had going for us.

Even though we only had five weeks of rehearsals before our performances, we managed to pull the performances together. We had several slip-ups, but the orchestra generally stayed in the same musical location as the actors (even if intonation was not exactly quite perfect). The largest difficulty was closing night, when our lighting guy didn’t show up until halfway through the show. Remarkably, it worked out fairly well; we just used the normal lighting. Musically, the most frustrating thing was that my concert mistress would not play the solo countermelody of the tango, instead giving it to her stand partner without my knowledge and after I had specifically asked her to play the solo the previous performance. Her stand partner, unfortunately, did not have a wonderful sense of intonation. Furthermore, my main cellist could not be there on closing night and

the cello, consequently, does not sound quite as good on the closing night recordings as it ought to.

Nevertheless, the actors worked very hard to be able to sing my music while dancing, and their timing only improved. Richard Guscott (Sir Gawain) in particular worked very hard to be able to sing his part. Kristina Sisto (Morgan le Fay) had the brilliant idea to take the last note of “Great Aunt” up an octave, to add drama. The most wonderful vocalist, however, was Jamie Bradley (Sir Bertilak/Green Knight), because he consistently knew his lyrics, could hit his notes, and managed to sing while chasing various cardboard animals throughout the auditorium.

Reflection

There is so much I could have done differently. If I had to choose one thing, I would like to have the script to be written before I wrote the music and lyrics. That would have made the musical more cohesive, I think. I would have also liked more than five weeks of rehearsals. However, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: The Musical!* derived much of its charm from the fact that it was a bit edgy and off the cuff. Besides, there was no way we could have gotten any more time; it was hard enough to get the amount of time we had.

Quite frankly, if I allow myself to dwell on the things we could have done better, I will never finish. The truth is that Maria, Alysse, and I did a wonderful job with what we had, and we produced and performed a musical in the space of a year, starting from scratch. It was even pretty entertaining, and the audience

seemed to like it. We exceeded everybody's expectations. I will never forget the incredible challenges I had to surmount in order to complete this musical.

This is the thought that allows me to sleep at night: I did my absolute best.

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